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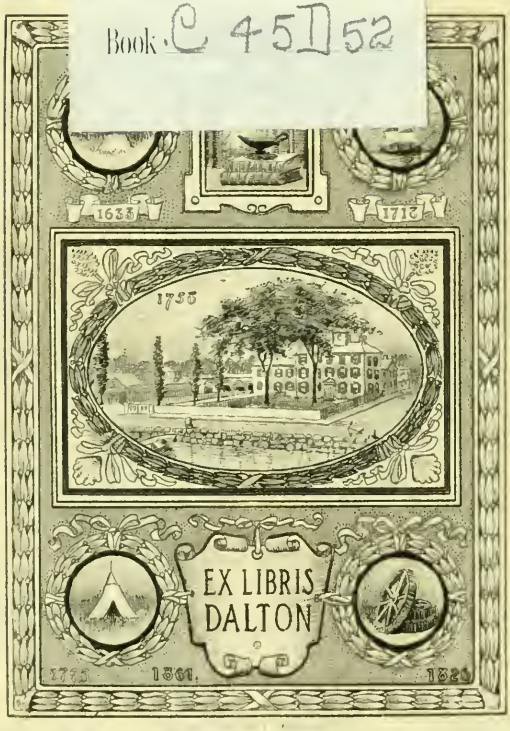

A WINTERSNIGHT TALE

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Told on Christmas Evening, 1903

to

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dalton

Major and Mrs. Henry Dalton

Mrs. Frank Morison

Elsie Dalton

Susan Howe

Isabel Morison

Harry Dalton

Julia Dwight

Alice Dalton

Leslie Morison

Philip Dalton

Susan Dalton

Mac Gregor Morison

Ellen Dalton

Rogers Rich

. . .

A WINTERSNIGHT TALE

THE first Town Meeting of the Chelmsford settlement, in Middlesex County, was held September 22, 1654, more than two hundred and forty-nine years ago, at William Fletcher's house, there being no public town-house.

My maternal ancestor, Edward Spaulding, as the name was then spelt, was chosen one of the Selectmen, as he was several times subsequently.

He married Margaret.

His son John married Hannah.

His son Edward married Priscilla, Governor Endicott officiating.

His son Joseph married Elizabeth.

His son Simeon married Sarah.

His son Noah married Anne.

Noah and Anne were my grandparents.

These six generations of gentlemen were yeomen, living on and cultivating their own

lands, while serving the town, colony, state and church in various public offices.

My great-grandfather, Colonel Simeon, inherited lands from his father in 1728. When he was twenty-three years old, having fallen in love with Sarah, he married her, and that same year bought more land and soon built a house on it, where they lived the rest of their lives. This was our Chelmsford homestead, which my grandfather Noah inherited. He, his daughter Julia, who was my mother, and myself were born in this house. It is about one hundred and sixty years old, and is still standing, a modest structure of two stories, the hewed posts and beams of the frame showing in the rooms. The oil picture, copied from a pencil drawing of my brother John's, hangs on the wall of this room where we are now eating our 1903 Christmas dinner.

There are, you will notice, several ancient elms about the house, which must be nearly if

not quite the same age, and I suppose Colonel Simeon planted them.

My grandfather Noah was fond of having his grandchildren about him, so it was here that, after my father moved to his own house, I stayed a great deal in summers, and often in winters, during my early teens. It seemed to me the pleasantest of all possible places. I liked it better than going to school.

Sixty-odd years ago life on a New England farm was very different from that of to-day, as were also the characters and qualities of the households. The farms, then, had usually descended through several generations of pure English stock, as you will have noticed by the names of the gentlemen and gentlewomen which I have mentioned in the opening of this story. In examining the first town records of Chelmsford I did not find a solitary name other than English.

Furthermore, the "hired men," so called,

were young Americans, who came down from New Hampshire and Vermont to work during the summer months. Their pay was fourteen to sixteen dollars a month, with board and lodging. They were generally young fellows of excellent character, with plenty of self-respect. They did not shirk their duties, but worked long hours, especially in haying and harvesting time.

Much of my time was passed in their company, in riding the horse while they held the plow between the rows of potatoes and corn, and in the hay-fields, and in turning the grindstone when they sharpened their scythes, a kind of labor which made me tired.

Nearly all the food consumed by the household and animals was raised on the farm, and various industries, requiring no little knowledge and skill, were carried on to supply the domestic wants. Purchases of food were limited to such articles as tea, coffee, sugar, spirits, spices, etc. The products of the farm were

hay, wheat, rye, oats, corn, buckwheat, potatoes, beans, the small vegetables, fruits and poultry.

The pigs grew into hogs, were fattened on corn, killed and salted, the hams and bacon smoked, the lard tried out, the beef corned, cheeses, butter, soap and candles made, fruits were preserved, and rose water made from the rose leaves, which I had to pick.

The grain crops were reaped with the sickle, till a "cradle," so called, was substituted, —an efficient tool which required a stalwart man to swing, but it did great execution. Now it is as obsolete as the sickle. The grass was mowed with the scythe. The corn was husked by hand in the barn, sometimes in the evening by the dim light of two or three lanterns, followed by a simple supper. The ears were stored in bins and shelled by hand over the blade of a spade.

The grain was threshed on the barn floor with flails. When required for grinding into

meal it was winnowed, wind and weather being favorable, by spreading a sheet on the grass and pouring on it the grain from a peck measure held by a man at arm's length above his head, the wind blowing the dust and chaff away, just as the Phœnicians did and as the Egyptians do to-day. A wonderful hand winnowing machine was bought, which the neighbors came to see and admire, and the ancient picturesque way ceased. The grain was then bagged and taken to a little rickety grist mill, run by water from a brook some two miles the other side of the village, and ground into excellent meal, the miller taking his legal toll in payment for grinding. This was a full afternoon's job and I considered it "larks." The rude machinery seemed to me a wonderful creation of genius.

There was a cider mill on the farm, worked by a horse, who went round in a circle, grinding our apples and those of the neighbors. During the autumn apple season the mill was

busy all day and often well into the evening. I drove the horse, sitting on his back or in a chair fastened on the rig behind him. In the evening I was tied into the chair to prevent me from falling off if I went to sleep, which I generally did, but the horse did not know it, and would keep moving if I was there; or if he did stop, I woke up and started him along. About forty barrels of cider was the year's product of the farm; some was bottled, the bottles kept in sand in the cellar, and when opened the cider sparkled like this champagne which you have been drinking; some was kept in wood for common use, and some turned into vinegar for making pickles. This was the beginning of my manufacturing experience.

With all these varied products of the farm, the table was generously provided with the best of food. The kitchen fireplace was so large that I used to go into it, and, looking up the chimney, see the stars at night. The meats were roasted in a tin kitchen in front of the

fire, and the vegetables boiled in iron pots and kettles hung by chains on S-shaped hooks from a long iron crane.

On the side of this fireplace there was a big brick oven, where on Saturdays a fire of fagots was kept burning till the bricks were thoroughly heated, when it was swept clean of ashes, and the bakings for the next week's consumption, pots of beans, Indian pudding, brown and white bread, pies, etc., put in, and the door shut tight. The bread and pies were taken out in the afternoon, but the beans and pudding remained inside till Sunday, when they were served hot. There was little or no cooking on Sunday, for my grandfather, though in his early manhood he had been Captain of Cavalry in the Seventh Regiment, Second Brigade, Third Division of the Militia of the Commonwealth, was then senior deacon of the church.

Among the old-fashioned blue-and-white china in common use were two large tureens,

decorated with views of our beautiful State House on Beacon Hill, Boston, showing cows grazing on the Common in the foreground. You can now see one of these tureens on the sideboard in this room; its mate is at the West Beach Hill Cottage, Beverly Farms. Sometimes the entire *menu*, soup, meats and vegetables, was served in one or both of these generous tureens, followed, perhaps, by a pudding for dessert; and it was as good a dinner as you are having to-day, though not quite so elaborate.

Wool was sheared from the few sheep kept, carded by hand-cards and spun in the house on the same old wheel now up-stairs here. I recall distinctly the pleasant hum and buzz of this wheel in winter. The yarn was dyed a dark indigo blue, but not, I think, at the farm, and then sent to a little water mill at West Chelmsford, where it was woven with a strong cotton warp into an excellent fabric, called "farmer's frocking," from which was made

the long warm frocks which the men wore in their winter work.

A seamstress, named Lucy Shed, whom we children called "Bumble Bee," from her stoutness, cut and sewed these and other garments for the household, she living in the house while so occupied. I had a small blue frock, which gave me more real satisfaction than any clothes I have ever had since. The stockings, mittens, gloves and neck comforters for the family were knit from this yarn, in the house.

There was also a small wheel for spinning flax, which is now in the library, but I do not remember that it was ever used in my day, and it does not show signs of having done much work, while the wool wheel has evidently earned its living by long service.

There were always several hives of bees in the garden, which supplied ample store of honey, and this, I suppose, took the place of the white loaf sugar for some purposes. The West India soft brown sugar in common use

was not attractive in appearance, and had a rummy flavor.

When the bees swarmed it became a matter of much anxiety to secure them in a new hive. Sometimes the swarm, led by a revolutionary member, would try to secede, and rising in a body some fifteen feet in the air, would fly off with much humming, which could be heard at a considerable distance, in a bee line for the woods, or some isolated trees. When this happened, we ran along in front of them, beating tin cans and throwing up sand, trying to turn them back or make them swarm again where they could be secured. I do not remember that we ever succeeded in doing so. When, as usual, the bees swarmed on a bush or on a rail, placed for the purpose near their old home, a skilful person could generally re-hive them without much risk. But occasionally the bees would become unruly and then angry, when those of us who were watching the progress of events would scatter to a safe distance.

In the autumn a pair of steers or oxen, that had worked during the summer, were fatted and sent to Brighton to be sold.

In the spring the young cattle and calves were branded. A responsible drover came along, collected such stock from the neighboring farms, and drove them, often quite a herd, over the highway to Vermont, to graze during the summer on the rich hill pastures. They were driven down again in the autumn to be raised or fatted for market, much as is practised in Switzerland nowadays. Our stock went to Stoddard.

The direct highway from Boston to Concord, New Hampshire, called the Mammoth Road, passed through the farm in front of the house. It was traversed by large wagons covered by white canvas, and drawn by teams of four or six horses. Going north these were filled with store-goods, bringing back farm produce in return. They usually passed our

farm on Fridays. Sometimes there were several in a convoy, and in dry weather they raised great clouds of dust, from the poorly built road, which could be seen long before the teams came in sight, and after they had disappeared.

On the tail-board of these wagons there was usually a hogshead of New England rum, taken on from the Medford distillery as they came through that town. In those days rum was the only spirit in common use; it was cheap and potent, and an injury to the farming community. Perhaps the large quantities of salted meats consumed stimulated the craving for a "toddy" more cheering than the domestic hard cider.

No coal was then used in the country. The wood for fuel was cut in winter in the woodlot some two miles up the Westford road, and hauled down on ox sleds, making a big pile in the dooryard; also a few logs to be sawed into

boards for repairing the premises. I greatly prized these winter excursions into the snowy forest as a kind of arctic expedition.

Some kinds of birds were much more numerous then than now, especially the common pigeon. Vast flocks of these game birds flew to the north in the spring, returning south in the autumn. "Pigeon stands," so called, were prepared in a wood or near its edge, away from any house, some twenty feet square, the brush cleared away, and grain scattered on the ground, which would attract the birds in large quantities. A net was so arranged on poles on one side of the stand that by pulling a string when the birds were busy feeding, it would suddenly cover the space and imprison the game; and great numbers were caught in this simple way.

Partridge in the woods and quail in the thickets along the stone walls were more common than nowadays. In the pasture behind the barns, where were many old hollow apple

trees suitable for nests, turtle-doves,—a very beautiful bird,—wood-pigeons and woodpeckers abounded, and in the meadows beyond larks and bobolinks were plentiful. The hanging nests of the golden oriole were always pending from the great elms about the house. Chimney swallows built in the big kitchen chimney, the nests occasionally tumbling down on to the hearth, and the eaves of the barns were plastered inside and out with the clay nests of the swifts.

My uncle, Philip Spalding (whose namesake is soon to be one of the rulers of this great city), had much taste for and knowledge of horticulture, and was very successful in growing flowers and fruits. He was a gentle and refined man, but beyond his gardening was not very practical.

At the time of a craze for raising silkworms from the leaves of the plant *Morus Multicaulis*, which industry promised a sure fortune, he bought a supply of plants and silkworm eggs.

The plants were set out in the garden where raspberries and thimbleberries had formerly flourished. Benches were fitted up in the granary for the worms, which were duly hatched. Though the plants grew rapidly the worms did better still. More and more leaves were needed daily, while the plants supplied less and less. In this emergency, to avert a fatal disaster and the loss of a fortune, resource was had to a group of old mulberry trees on top of Robin's Hill, two miles in front of the house, but four miles by road. Thither I was sent in a wagon day after day to pick the leaves. The squirrels were fond of the sweet mulberries, which were plentiful, and they became so used to seeing me up in the trees and beneath them, that they treated me in the most friendly way. By feeding the worms with these leaves they were saved alive until in due time they turned into beautiful yellow cocoons. These, when first baked to kill the chrysalis inside, were immersed in hot water, and the raw silk was

reeled off and made into hanks for the market. I never heard what the financial result was, but as the experiment was not repeated, I think it turned out a failure. For myself I was not sorry, as I had had enough of leaf picking.

After the death of my grandmother the housekeeper was Hannah Wilson, a Vermont young woman, with a bright complexion and red hair. She was very efficient and a good cook. One day in a paroxysm of house-cleaning she lighted upon a box of old papers in the garret and emptied them into the pig-yard, the general receptacle for rubbish. Happily my Uncle Philip discovered what she had done just in time to jump into the yard, disperse the pigs, who were already destroying the papers, and rescue many of them; but some were ruined. Among those saved were civil and military commissions and semi-public documents, official and private correspondence, bundles of deeds nearly two hundred years old, and various valuable papers of dates

before, during and after the Revolution, which are now arranged and preserved among the Family Records in my keeping.

Among the commissions, for example, is one from "William Shirley, Esq., Captain General and Governor in Chief in and over His Majesty's Province in Massachusetts Bay in New England &c.," appointing "Simeon Spaulding, Gentleman, to be cornet of the first troop of horse," dated March 18, 1755. There is also one dated "In the 28th year of His Majesty King George the Second. Annoq. Domini 1755," and signed "W. Shirley." Another commission, twenty years later,—1775,—appointing Simeon "to be one of our Justices to keep our peace," was signed by "Samuel Adams, Secy.," whose statue now stands in Adams Square, Boston.

But shortly there was no peace to keep, for another commission, dated February 12, 1776, appointed Simeon "one of the Field officers of the Seventh Regiment in the sixteenth

year of the Reign of George the Third &c." Two days later another commission appointed Simeon colonel of the regiment. This last document is interesting as showing the printed heading, "George the Third, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, France and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith &c.," crossed out, and having this title written above, "The Government and People of the Massachusetts Bay in New England," and at the bottom the date, "In the 15th year of His Majesty's Reign," crossed out, and the words, "In the year of our Lord, one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five," substituted. You will notice that these Rebels were using the King's stationery without his knowledge or consent, which was certainly wrong.

These commissions are a good inheritance, and rank with those issued by Abraham Lincoln to my brothers John, Edward and Henry.

The other important route from the sea to the back country was by the then famous Mid-

dlesex canal, which was opened for traffic just a century ago. It began at Middlesex Village, on the bank of the Merrimack River, some three miles from the farm, and ended at a basin in Haymarket Square, Boston,—a distance of twenty-seven miles. The crafts were long, narrow flat-bottomed scows, called "canal-boats." They were towed by horses and moved about three miles an hour, bringing down such bulky things as lumber, cord-wood, bricks, hay, etc., and carrying back store-goods. By means of several sets of locks on the river, this navigation reached Concord, New Hampshire, sixty-five miles from Boston. The canal cost half a million dollars, a large sum in those days. Besides these freight boats, there were "packet-boats," for passengers. I have been told that, some time in my first year, my mother made this voyage, taking me with her, when she went to visit Madame Dalton at her house, No. 82 Mt. Vernon Street, Boston. If this is true—and I have no reason to doubt it

—I probably enjoy the distinction of being the only living person who first arrived in Boston by a canal-boat. But I do not claim any great merit on this account.

When the Boston and Lowell Railroad was opened, nearly seventy years ago, the value of the canal was destroyed. Afterwards the Boston and Maine Railroad built its station on the site of the canal basin in Haymarket Square.

Later still this station was moved back to Causeway Street, where it is now, and ten years ago the Boston Transit Commission took this same site for a subway station. I mention these incidents as unique illustrations of the radical changes in the methods of transportation occurring at this spot during seventy years, as well as illustrating the progress which science has made; namely, the canal-boat, towed by horses; the trains of cars hauled by steam-engines, and the electric car, with its source of power miles away, transmitted by an insignificant-looking copper wire.

You young folks will doubtless live to see even greater changes, such as, for example, flying machines, to which I do not doubt you will contribute your full share.

And I trust you will take your revenges on somebody by telling your stories, as a recompense for what you have so politely endured in listening to mine.

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